



Gabon's National Parks

Spotlight ■ Turning vision into reality

Saving one of the world's natural wonders

Gabon's new National Parks are home to an astonishing variety of flora and fauna, including this once-captive gorilla.

MICHAEL NICHOLS / NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba of Gabon surprised the world in August 2002 by announcing plans to establish 13 National Parks, covering just over 10 percent of Gabon's landmass. This was "one of the most courageous conservation acts in the past 20 years," Steven Sanderson, president of the Wildlife Conservation Society, said at the time. "President Bongo has set a new standard for wildlife protection in Central Africa — one that we hope other nations will follow."

The president's initial purpose was to preserve for the world the uniquely rich collection of animal and plant life in Gabon's forests, which was under threat from logging, poaching for elephant tusks and bush meat, and forest clearing for agriculture.

Another main purpose was to help the Gabon economy, which is facing a possible decline if oil reserves should run out. A dramatic growth of tourism was also hoped for, and there have been some immediate successes. With a memorable phrase, the president said at the time that this could lead to the creation of "a new industry based on enjoying, not extracting, natural resources." The president foresaw Gabon becoming "a natural Mecca, attracting pilgrims from the four points of the compass in search of one of the last remaining natural wonders on earth."

What progress has been made over the past two years

in pursuing this dream? First, there was a need to create an infrastructure. The National Parks Council was established, and management teams were set up for each of the 13 parks. The work of the ministries in charge of tourism and forestry was greatly expanded. Staff are being trained for conservation work in the parks and for the care of tourists. A symbolic success story in Loango National Park: One member of a newly qualified team of nine tourist guides was previously a poacher. Part of his salary goes each month to pay off a fine for illegally killing an elephant.

Challenges remain

Michael Fay, a conservationist and explorer, played a major part in inspiring the National Parks project. When asked by the National Geographic magazine about the challenges that remain, Fay said: "We have opened up a large debate. We need to build infrastructure, train a huge number of people and integrate these National Parks into the landscape, so that logging companies and traditional landowners have their say. We need to make sure these people are heard and satisfied. Then at the same time, we need to start bringing people in from the outside. We need to develop ecotourism, bring in foreign aid for the development of the park." He added: "We opened the box, and now we have to figure out what's inside. And we

have to make order out of this concept that we've created."

Another immediate success following the announcement of the National Parks project has come from the publicity it has stimulated. Articles in the world's press (notably in the National Geographic magazine) have made millions aware of the richness that needs to be protected in Gabon and of the huge investments that need to be attracted from governments and from nongovernmental organizations. Gabon has produced a lavishly illustrated coffee-table book describing the characteristics of each of the 13 National Parks. Internet sites concerning the 13 parks, the Loango Project and Gabon in general are carefully maintained.

All this makes clear that the National Parks include pristine rain forests, mangroves, savannas, ancient forests, lagoons, marshes, rivers, canyons and coastlines. The parks contain about 8,000 plant species (some recently found that grow only in Gabon), 200 mammal species and 600 bird species. Some estimates say that Gabon has 60,000 elephants, 35,000 gorillas and 64,000 chimpanzees, as well as concentrations of forest buffalo, mandrills, sun-tailed monkeys, bush pigs and antelope, including Ogilby's duikers.

Aquatic animals include all three species of crocodile present in Africa, hippopotamuses and manatee. Six

species of whales have been seen off Cape Lopez, and Mayumba is the one of the two best beaches on earth for marine-turtle nestings.

Two sets of circumstances caused this richness. During the Ice Age, the mountains and plateaus of Gabon served as refuges for animals during difficult climatic phases. In modern times, Gabon's low population density (about 3.2 inhabitants per square kilometer) means that large forest areas are comparatively little affected by human activity.

The creation of the 13 parks has made scientific research into this treasure house of flora and fauna easier. One example comes from the Loango National Park. For four years, a team of scientists working for the Wildlife Conservation Society has been observing, photographing and collecting data on the humpback whales off the coast. They are numerous (at least 1,500 and possibly as many as 3,000) because commercial whaling was stopped in these waters in the 1950's. The WCS research is part of an International Whaling Commission project to determine the worldwide whale population. And the WCS work is being helped by the tourist whale-watching activities organized by Operation Loango. Thus the National Parks project, with the aid of tourists, could help save the lives of future whale generations.

KEN MACKENZIE ■ Paris



Canoeing near the crashing waters of Kongou Falls: Ivindo National Park contains the Kongou and Mingouli waterfalls, which are the biggest and most spectacular falls in forested Africa.

MICHAEL NICHOLS / NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Tourism ■ Plans for expansion

Elephants, gorillas and spectacular waterfalls

At present, tourism accounts for only about 3 percent of Gabon's gross domestic product, but the Ministry of Tourism, spurred by the National Parks initiative, has plans to more than double that figure by 2010. To put things in a West African setting, in the 1990's Gabon received about 3,000 visitors a year, compared with about 300,000 going to Senegal and 250,000 to the Ivory Coast. Gabon now has a Tourism Promotion Center, which is helping the country's performance in the competitive world tourism market. A New York-based consultancy is working to make the country better known in the United States.

One area that offers great opportunities for expansion is ecotourism. A committee of experts has drawn up a report on how best to display to the world the rich treasures the Gabon forests have to offer —

elephants, gorillas, antelope and other wildlife, together with an abundance of bird life, astonishing flora, spectacular waterfalls and breathtaking scenic vistas.

The authorities are aware that development has to be done sensitively, so that tourists can observe nature without interfering with it. It is a question of designing walkways, observation platforms and hides that are unobtrusive in the forest, as well as simple but comfortable lodges rather than large luxury hotels. Gabon's Minister of Tourism Jean Massima says: "We favor building medium-scale constructions that fit in with the environment. Tourists are far more interested in the site they are visiting than the class of hotel."

500 miles of coastline

The minister notes that Gabon can offer tourists the usual opportunities for holiday relaxation. "We have 500 miles [805 kilometers] of coastline, with bathing resorts and opportunities for fishing," he says.

Libreville has high-class hotels and can offer tourists the usual attractions of city life — an introduction to African music, for instance, and the Musée des Arts et Traditions, which has a notable collection of the Central African masks that have been so influential with modern artists. The Albert Schweitzer Hospital is 180 kilometers from Libreville, and a museum there deals with the work of the famous Nobel Prize winner. Gabon has archaeological remains without parallel in Central Africa, including stone tools dating back 400,000 years and more than 2,000 rock carvings.

Measures are being taken to provide the trained staff needed to deal with a rise in tourist numbers. "We do not have institutions capable of delivering the necessary

training on the spot," Massima explains, "and so we have signed agreements with Morocco, Kenya, South Africa and Tunisia."

Transport within Gabon remains a problem, and air links from overseas can be costly. However, Air Gabon has twice-weekly flights between Libreville and Johannesburg, and as connections with London, Paris and other cities. Inter Air, Air France, Cameroon Airlines and Royal Air Maroc are among the airlines flying into Libreville. Air Gabon offers tour companies special rates, and Massima hopes that as interest in Gabonese tourism grows, charter flights will become more viable and that competition will push costs down.

K.M.

Destinations ■ Conservation and business

Loango Park: Where hippos play in the surf

Leading the way in the development of Gabon tourism is Operation Loango, which is dedicated to conservation with a business backbone. The Loango National Park is unique in that it has 100 kilometers (60 miles) of coastline, much of it white sandy beaches, which borders game-rich forest and savanna. This allows a tourist a large variety of wildlife experiences, including the sight of elephant families playing on a beach and hippos surfing in the waves.

A total of \$6 million is being invested in Operation Loango, a joint initiative by a private company, Société de Conservation et Développement (SCD); a U.S.-based conservation organization, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS); and Gabon's Ministère de l'Economie Forestière, the ministry of forestry and the environment.

A lodge and a group of tented camps already cater to groups of tourists, and the company expects that expansion will allow it to break even by 2005. Profits made by SCD will be reinvested in the area to ensure the continued and economically sustainable protection of the national park.

The man who inspired and now directs Operation Loango is Rombout Swanborn, a Shell executive's son who spent much of his youth in ecologically rich forest areas. "In my opinion, conservation can work with a clear business vision," he says. "The combination of business and conservation brings out the best in a project, making it target-driven, cost-aware and quality-conscious. Our hope is that Operation Loango will be the business model that will be copied in the other National Parks."

The plan, called Operation Gabon 2010, calls for the total investment of \$30 million, and negotiations are under way for other nongovernmental organizations to share the costs of this. About \$15 million would go to three other National Parks — Plateau Bateke, Ivindo and Minkébé. About \$5 million would be used to enlarge aviation activities, and another \$5 million devoted to international marketing and sales.

Publicity currently attracting tourist groups promises "luxurious accommodation in a safe and untouched environment, together with the excitement of being part of a larger ecosystem." Operation Loango

operates its own planes, boats and motor vehicles. Two safaris a day, with qualified guides, offer the chance to see elephants, buffalo, whales, turtles and gorillas.

Operation Loango has become involved in helping with various research, monitoring, surveillance and education activities in the region. Operation Plage Propre has a team of young Gabonese employed full-time to clean the beaches. The trained ecoguides provide the authorities with regular information about poaching activities and sometimes undertake specific reconnaissance patrols. A program is in place to bring local schoolchildren into the park for educational visits, and the long-term intention is to fund a school in the area.

Operation Loango's whale-watching activities provide help with a whale research project undertaken by the WCS. There are at least 14 different species of whales and dolphins off Gabon's coast, with possibly as many as 3,000 humpbacks.

K.M.

Message from President Omar Bongo Ondimba

Speaking of the National Parks initiative, Gabon's President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba (generally known as President Bongo) says: "I have created 13 National Parks that will be places of preservation for the flora and fauna of Gabon, and this decision is not only something written on paper, as certain people have suggested. The forests of Gabon, which represent an unsurpassed world treasure, constitute one of the axes of my strategy in the war against poverty. The parks will be managed in a sensible fashion in order to generate employment and income for those displaced from their previous employment in the timber industry. The project is under my direct responsibility."

President Bongo was born in 1935. After leaving school, he served in the French Air Force until 1958. In the government of the independent Gabon's first president, Leon Mba, he served as chief of staff, defense minister and then vice president. President Mba died in 1967, and President Bongo took over and has been in power ever since. In 1968, he established Parti Démocratique Gabonais. In 1990, he introduced multiparty democracy and has repeatedly been returned to power in elections.

K.M.

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